

## Introduction

Jesus said, “How can I describe the Kingdom of God?  
What story should I use to illustrate it?” –MARK 4:30 (NLT)

**Missions Sunday:** The day when churches honor the missionaries they support. The day when flags of two dozen nations are paraded into the sanctuary. The day of the interminable slideshows. And, at my (Jim’s) church, the day of the ethnic costumes—most notably, African robes and headdress worn by middle-aged Scandinavians.

At least that was how I looked at it. Sometimes it still is, unfortunately. These foreign missionaries were good people doing great things, serving God and bringing people to Christ. But they couldn’t show or tell an interesting story to save their lives. I know I wasn’t the only one in the congregation who sat there semi-comatose, thinking about that afternoon’s Bears game or whether I should get the oil changed.

I’m not proud to admit that I have used Missions Sunday as an excuse to sleep late, reasoning that I would have been doing that in church anyway. When I did go, I’d sit there counting bald heads or ceiling lights as some missionary droned on about life in some country where people use wildebeest dung as money.

At other times and at various churches, I've sat through presentations from teams sent on short-term mission trips. It usually goes something like this:

*"We had an awesome time! God really showed up. Look, you can tell from these Facebook pictures of me and my friends having fun together."*

*"They have so little but they smile so much!"*

*"I can't describe how amazing it was."*

(Team members weep and hug each other)

Great things indeed may have happened on this trip. But this kind of presentation doesn't do the job. Why? Because they used Christianese clichés and spoke in generalities. They made the presentation about themselves rather than grabbing the opportunity to tell real stories about real people—people with real names and real challenges who have experienced real transformation.

Meanwhile, people in the pews—people who went to work and lugged kids to orthodontist appointments and paid the mortgage while this team jetted to some exotic locale—responded with suppressed yawns. Or worse yet, with raised eyebrows, and the sentiment that they had just sent these people on a really expensive vacation. And if people inside the church are uninspired by all this, how will it ever connect with anyone outside?

I was, and am, one of the many skeptics who look at a short-term trip presentation while doing the math on how much money this cost vs. the perceived return on investment. And like many, I still glaze over during those slideshows. God

has a fantastic sense of irony, though. Today, Lincoln and I are among those who tell congregations what missionaries do and why everyone should care. We do it with a sense of urgency. Too many people have been too bored for too long.

It doesn't have to be this way. Consider this story from Brazil:

*About midnight, the team heads out, almost 100 of them.*

*They walk single-file down a narrow road leading into a steamy Rio de Janeiro slum called Arará. They head toward the baile funk music pounding through giant speakers in the town square.*

*They're crashing a boca de fuma—a drug-fueled party thrown by the local boss. Around them, prostitutes work the square. Dealers sell crack, meth, and cocaine openly on tables. Other drug traffickers, many just boys, tote AK-47s.*

*Suddenly the music cuts out. Traffickers whip out their cellphones, quickly scanning texts. Motorcycles rev up and bolt out of the square.*

*Then, gunshots. Lots of them.*

If that story's opening didn't make you want more, you might need medical attention. The people caught in the gunfight that night regularly share their faith with drug dealers, and have seen many come to faith in Christ.

Not every great missions story reads like a Bruce Willis movie. It doesn't have to. Try these heroic tales:

In India, a Hindu accepts Christ and launches a Christian

house church movement in one of Hinduism's holiest cities. In the southern Philippines, a Muslim radical and murderer accepts Jesus and goes back to serve as a Christian missionary in his wife's all-Muslim village. In central England, a Christian ministry works to keep Muslim youths off the streets and out of crime—with the hearty consent of the boys' parents.

The common denominator: God is working. So why aren't those stories being told? Or if they are being told, why aren't they going viral? Missions stories should be energizing the church about the Great Commission. Yet, missionaries and their stories and their display booths and their ceremonial outfits often evoke a collective yawn from so many sincerely devoted believers. Why?

When did the Great Commission become passé? Why does giving to missions keep declining? Why have so many missions pastors been laid off in the past decade? And why aren't young adults filling the ranks of the older missionaries who are retiring?

Certainly part of the problem is that American churches are so relatively safe, affluent, and comfortable. The prospect of throwing all of that away is so, um, foreign that we can't begin to relate, other than to say, "I could never do that."

But part of the problem rests with missionaries, too. It's poor storytelling. It costs time, money, and, worst of all, opportunity for wider engagement in the Great Commission. Ever read a missionary's newsletter and cringe at the overly emotional churchy language?

*"We saw the Lord work in so many wonderful ways!!!! It was AWESOME! We just wanted to love on people!!"*

Really? How? Who? Why? And where are the details? It's

like looking underneath five inches of frosting and not finding any cake.

Imagine yourself reading a sports story and finding this:

*It was the best baseball game EVER!! The pitchers were amazing. The batters were even more amazing!!!!*

*This one player hit the ball, and everyone was so excited. When the manager came out and changed pitchers, we were like, “No way!”*

*The music was LOUD! And the food. It was, like, indescribable.*

Included with this riveting account is a photo, taken from about fifty feet away, of a group of people posing and smiling in front of the stadium.

No newspaper would dare run that. It offers no meaningful story, characters, plot, or details. At the risk of stepping on toes, we’ll suggest that this is not far from the kinds of stories that too many career missionaries and short-term team members foist on their audiences. The result is the same: people stop reading and listening. They’ve been given a hundred exclamation points and zero reasons to care.

We both spent significant time in the newspaper industry, where grabbing the reader’s attention is like trying to get a ten-year-old to eat broccoli. You know it’s good for him. He might even agree it would be good for him. But c’mon. Broccoli? So you have to make it more palatable—maybe cover it with cheese sauce or bake it into a casserole where the flavors blend into something great.

When missionary stories are seen as saccharine, dull—or worse, as thinly veiled fund-raising efforts—people never engage. In fact, they willfully *disengage*. They perceive a missionary as just another salesman trying to get their money. But, when those stories are well-crafted, told as the great adventures they truly are, people listen. They keep reading. God might even give them a burden for a particular group of people.

*“God is doing great, miraculous things right under my nose that I was not aware of.”*

*—Missionary and news-reporting class member,  
Costa Rica*

For all of the dull missionary stories we’ve read and forgotten, others left an indelible mark. Author David Aikman points to the way powerful missions stories have influenced revival. In the 1970s, David Wilkerson’s *The Cross and the Switchblade* told about how God transformed a New York street gang member. In 2005, Brother Yun’s *The Heavenly Man* inspired millions of readers with eye-popping stories of the tremendous faith of the Chinese house church movement—and the persecution that still dogs it.

Aikman believes revival will happen again as a worldwide audience learns of what God is doing. We agree. In fact, we believe that every person who becomes a believer in Jesus Christ has been influenced by a compelling story. Likewise, every person who decides to serve him as a missionary also is influenced by compelling stories. What greater motivation could there be to tell these stories?

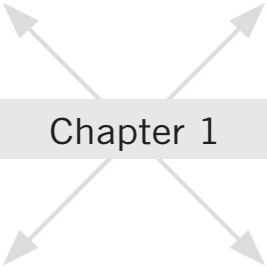
One of the tenets of evangelism is to share the gospel at all opportunities, and then leave the results to God. What if missionaries adopted a similar approach: learn to tell powerful stories of what God is doing around the world—simply “brag on God,” as a friend of mine puts it—and then leave the results to Him? Would people need a sales pitch after that?

This book is directed at anyone who wants to see the American church increase its engagement in the Great Commission around the world. It’s for anyone working in and around missions who wants to learn a few basic techniques for telling better stories via the written word, photography, and video. It’s especially for anyone who wants to pose two questions that can change lives: **What is God up to? How can I get in on it?**

We believe God can use that kind of storytelling to infuse energy into local congregations . . . to motivate long-term relationships with missions work worldwide . . . to inspire a new generation of missionaries . . . in short, to make disciples.

So, if you’re looking for practical training that could help advance the kingdom of God, grab your reporter’s notebook and come along.

—JIM KILLAM & LINCOLN BRUNNER



## Chapter 1

# **IF GOD SAYS HE LOVES YOU, CHECK IT OUT**

If you were Luke, traveling companion of the apostle Paul, and you wanted to set about writing the story of Jesus Christ, where would you start?

You never actually met Jesus face-to-face, so you're going to have to construct the story secondhand. Divine inspiration will play a huge role, but you probably don't know that yet. Many accounts of Jesus' life—some credible, others not so much—were circulating during the first century. So your first task would be to read as many of those accounts as you could, and start formulating questions.

Then you'd put together a list of people you needed to talk to—people who were there, who knew Jesus at various times in his life. Credible sources. You'd interview those people at length, asking them who, what, when, where, why, and how. You'd take careful notes, because the tape recorder will not be invented for another 1,900 years. Then you'd compile those notes into your story—choosing what to include and what to



leave out, based on whether it contributed to the overall point of the story.

Having done all that, you'd finally write a well-researched, orderly, credible account for your audience, the early church, so people could know what really happened and what it all meant.

We have just described the work of a journalist. Well, except for the part about divine inspiration. A journalist examines facts; interviews eyewitnesses; collects details; produces a story that is timely, important, and interesting; and delivers it to an audience. The purpose (beyond eking out a modest living, of course) is to authoritatively show the audience what happened, and why they should care.

Look at the first four verses of Luke's gospel. Before launching into the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah, Luke the physician introduces himself as Luke the journalist:

*Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1–4 NIV)*

A sign used to hang in Chicago's famed City News Bureau: "If your mother says she loves you, check it out." It

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admonished reporters to verify all claims with eyewitness accounts.

Nineteen centuries ago, Luke checked it out. All of it. Interviewing key people, he carefully reconstructed the events of Jesus' life, providing the kind of vivid details that modern features editors live for:

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. (Luke 2:8–9 ESV)*

Without Luke, Christmas today would look completely different. We wouldn't have nativity scenes. No pageants. No "Angels We Have Heard on High." Gospel writers Mark and John skip Jesus' birth altogether. Matthew tells us about the magi, but only gives bare-bones details about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem. Luke gives us the shepherds, the angels, no room at the inn, the manger, the swaddling clothes.

Want to know how a reporter gets a better story than anyone else? Better sourcing. And who would be the best source for all that happens in Luke 1 and 2?

Mary.

How else could Luke have quoted the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise upon learning she was pregnant? How else would he have discovered the details of John's birth, or his parents' responses? How would he have known about Simeon and Anna in the temple, and their reaction upon seeing the baby Jesus? Luke includes details that only Mary would have

known, and he leaves us this clue in chapter 2, verse 19: “but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often” (NLT).

### DETAILS, DETAILS

Good journalism pays attention to detail. Not just random detail, but revealing detail—something that helps people understand the story better, even to see it in their mind’s eye. Luke’s gospel brims with this kind of detail.

*On one of those days, as he was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. (Luke 5:17–19 ESV)*

Matthew recounts this same episode, but omits some of the revealing detail: the crowded room, digging a hole in the roof, lowering the man through it into the middle of the room.

Another example:

*He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seek-*

*ing to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” (Luke 19:1–8 ESV)*

Luke scoops all the other gospel writers on this one, and in so doing captures one of the best examples of Jesus’ straightforward brand of grace. Again, the crowd, the kind of tree Zacchaeus climbed, the dialogue . . . vintage Luke.

Notice the punchy sentences, the sharp action verbs, the rare adjective here and there. In Luke, God chose a writer who happened to be a doctor to give us a whole book of clear snapshots of Jesus’ life. In so doing, Luke did the painstaking legwork of an ace reporter.

Good journalists are good sifters. They take a pile of pieces—some of which belong, some of which don’t—and construct them into something that makes sense and looks good.

In his book *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement*, Michael Card says of Luke, “He has ‘ordered’ the story of Jesus. He has collected stories and grouped them together in meaningful ways.”

That’s exactly what journalists do. We are not stenographers, reporting every detail of an event with equal weight. We choose the most significant as our focus.

The apostle John gives us a hint about the amount of leg-work that all four gospel writers had to do in the final verse of his account of Jesus' life.

*Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:25, NLT)*

What Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John had to do, then, was sift. They had to take the best stories and work them into narratives that captured Jesus' life accurately and fairly. Writing with the Holy Spirit sitting at the editor's desk probably made that task easier, but still—can you imagine the stories they could have told but ran out of time and space to write? Look what we have, think about what the gospel writers must have left out, and it makes the Gospels that much more impressive.

#### WHO IS THIS GUY?

The eighth and ninth chapters of Luke are, in themselves, an example of masterful journalism (remember that the chapter and verse divisions were added centuries later). Chapter 8 opens with Jesus and his growing band of followers—now including women—traveling from town to town. It sets the scene. The story then lets readers tag along as Jesus teaches from town to town. We get the parables of the farmer scattering seed and of the lamp.

Then, a pivotal scene: the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the terrified disciples, and Jesus ordering the storm to be calm. A short, powerful quote from his stunned disciples: "Who is this

man? When he gives a command, even the wind and waves obey him!”

“*Who is this man?*” That’s the central question of the Gospels, distilled into one amazing, short anecdote about a storm and a boat. Notice that Luke himself doesn’t ask the question. He lets the story’s characters ask it, in dialogue. And then, for the rest of chapters 8 and 9, Luke sets about answering it—again not by telling us, but by *showing* us.

In chapter 8, Jesus not only is shown to hold power over the weather. He holds power over demons—shown as he casts a legion of them out of a man and into a herd of pigs. He holds power over sickness and disease—shown as the hemorrhaging woman touches the fringe of his robe and immediately is healed. And he even holds power over death—shown as he raises the daughter of Jairus, the synagogue leader.

In Chapter 9, Luke keeps building toward an answer by stringing together key scenes. Jesus’ sending out of the disciples and feeding of the 5,000 show his ability and desire to provide for people’s needs. Then, the central question again—this time asked of the disciples two different ways by Jesus himself: “Who do people say I am? . . . Who do you say I am?” After some of the disciples give the standard “one of the prophets” response, Peter exclaims, “You are the Messiah, sent from God!”

Cue the dramatic music. It’s finally out there. Chapter 9, verse 20. Jesus’ true identity, bluntly stated by a man who never minced words. Jesus then quickly reminds them not to tell anyone—and that the Messiah is not what they expected.

“*Who is this man?*” That’s a question every journalist should ask himself when composing a story about a person. It’s the heart of every good profile. And then, the real art is

to reveal the answer not in statements, but in stories and dialogue. Luke does this throughout his gospel and Acts; he gives readers enough clues to figure it out for themselves.

SIMON (PETER) SAYS . . .

In the latter part of Acts, Luke does much of his reporting firsthand based on his travels with Paul. Earlier, though, he employs the same reporting techniques he used for his gospel. Luke wasn't present for Peter's miraculous escape from jail, so he would have had to reconstruct Acts 12:6–19 based on an interview with Peter. Let's imagine how that interview might have gone:

Luke: So, I heard you escaped from prison.

Peter: Yeah, it was crazy.

Luke: What happened?

Peter: Well, an angel came in the middle of the night and let me out.

Luke: An angel? What did he do?

Peter: Well, he pushed on me, and when I woke up there was this bright light.

Luke: He pushed on you? Where?

Peter: On my side.

Luke: Then what happened?

Peter: He told me to get dressed and put on my sandals.

Luke: Were those his exact words?

Peter: Yeah.

Luke: Did he say anything else?

Peter: He said, "Now put on your coat and follow me."

Luke: Exact words?

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- Peter: Exact words. So I did what he said and followed him out of the cell.
- Luke: Wait. Weren't you chained somehow?
- Peter: Oh, yeah. I was chained to two guards, but when the angel woke me up, the chains just fell off.
- Luke: Two guards were *chained* to you?
- Peter: Yeah.
- Luke: Where were the chains attached?
- Peter: At the wrists.
- Luke: And the chains fell off? How?
- Peter: I don't know. They just fell off.
- Luke: The guards didn't wake up?
- Peter: I don't really know. The whole thing was kind of like a dream. I had this angel in front of me, so I wasn't paying a lot of attention to the guards, you know?
- Luke: So then what happened?
- Peter: Well, I just followed the angel and we walked out.
- Luke: Did anyone see you?
- Peter: I'm not sure. We went past two guard posts and then went through the gate leading to the city.
- Luke: Wouldn't that gate have been closed and locked?
- Peter: Yeah, it just opened by itself.
- Luke: What were you thinking?
- Peter: You know, after that thing with the animals and the bedsheet, I just assumed this was another weird dream.
- Luke: When did you realize it wasn't?
- Peter: After we walked through that gate. All of a sudden the angel was gone, and it hits me: It's really



true. The Lord has sent his angel and saved me from Herod and from what the Jewish leaders had planned to do to me!

Luke: I just want to be sure I get some background here. Herod Agrippa put you in prison?

Peter: Yeah.

Luke: When was that?

Peter: During Passover week. It was right after he had James killed. We heard Herod was going to put me on trial and have me killed right after Passover.

Luke: What happened when Herod realized you were gone?

Peter: Well, from what we heard, he had people searching everywhere. When they didn't find me, he questioned the guards, but they didn't know what happened. So he had them killed. I still feel bad about that part.

Luke: Okay, so you're walking down the street and you've realized this is no dream. Where did you go?

Peter: I went to Mary's house—John Mark's mother. Turns out, a bunch of people were praying for me there.

Luke: That must have been quite a shock to them when you showed up at the gate.

Peter: It was pretty funny, actually. A servant girl answered the door in the gate. She knew my voice and got all excited that I was there. So she runs back inside, and here I am still standing outside, banging on the door.

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Luke: Ha! I assume somebody finally came back and let you in?

Peter: Yeah. They couldn't believe it. It got kind of loud, so I had to motion for them to be quiet.

Luke: What did you say to them?

Peter: I told them what happened and told them to tell James and the others.

Luke: Oh, forgot to ask you before: Do you know the servant girl's name?

Peter: It was Rhonda, I think. Something like that. You might want to check with Mary on that.

### THE STORY YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ IS TRUE

There's another reason Luke's writing remains so powerful: the stories really happened. They pass what newsrooms call the "smell test." The reporter did such a thorough job, and has earned such credibility with peers, that people believe what they read. Here's where journalism departs radically from novels and short stories. Good journalists don't make stuff up.

In 1981, Janet Cooke of the *Washington Post* won the Pulitzer Prize for her incredible profile of an 8-year-old heroin addict. Problem was, it turned out not to be true. Cooke was forced to resign and return her prize.

Journalism schools still teach about Cooke—and about Stephen Glass of the *New Republic* in the 1990s, and Jayson Blair of the *New York Times* in the early 2000s. They're cautionary tales: fabricate a story, or even a quote, and you'll eventually get caught. You'll lose all credibility. Your journalism career will be over.

Now think about Luke. In response to many less-than-

credible stories circulating, he's interviewing eyewitnesses for his "careful account." These interviewees very likely will read and react to his account. By the time Luke writes his gospel—around AD 60—people are being martyred for the cause of Jesus Christ. This had better be absolutely, without-question accurate. To modify Jason Robards' classic line from *All the President's Men*: "Nothing's riding on this. Just the formation of the church and future of the whole world."

The part of Luke's account that required the most care, the part that everything was riding on and, frankly, the part hardest for skeptics to believe, was Jesus' resurrection.

Thankfully, both Luke and John devote significant space in their gospels to postresurrection scenes.

Luke places special emphasis on the Road to Emmaus scene (chapter 24). As is often the case, he's the only gospel writer to get this part of the story. He walks us through the scene, offering detail in the form of long, precise dialogue between the two travelers (Cleopas and an unnamed man) and Jesus. He gives us the climactic breaking-of-the-bread scene, where the men suddenly recognize the risen Jesus.

With all of those details, Luke leaves out one that seems pretty significant to us: the identity of the second traveler. That's frustrating, until you think: Luke, under God's inspiration, carefully chose which details to use and which ones to leave out. Much as we'd like to know who the second follower of Jesus was, we can only guess. Some biblical scholars think it was Peter.

Maybe it just wasn't important enough for Luke to include. But then why name Cleopas, whom the Bible never mentions before or after? We like to think that the unnamed

traveler was Luke's source for this story, and that he granted the interview on the condition of anonymity. If that's indeed the case, then Luke honored journalistic ethics, and perhaps protected someone's life, by not revealing his source.

### EYEWITNESS NEWS

We're not biblical scholars. We're journalists. We've highlighted Luke because we think his two books are the most journalistic in the Bible. Sometimes when we think about the Bible being divinely inspired, we picture the writers sitting at some ancient desk and God simply pouring the words into their heads. That may indeed have happened at times, especially during the writing process. But Luke makes it clear that the preliminary hard work of reporting played a huge role, too.

Luke's detail grows even more vivid in Acts, because starting with chapter 16 *he* is the eyewitness to much of what happens surrounding the apostle Paul. He starts using the word "we." He adds to the book's credibility by including detailed geographic references—logs that allow us today to plot these trips on a map and include them in the back of Bibles for reference.

You get the point. Good journalism forms a bridge from the people who lived the story to the people who didn't.

Or, as David Aikman puts it: "Journalism is an instinctive, passionate belief in truth and a determination to locate it."

A Christian believer who can do all of that can find quite a significant ministry. In fact, the words of Psalm 96:3 (NLT) can start to look a lot like a mission statement:

*Publish his glorious deeds among the nations. Tell everyone about the amazing things he does.*

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